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Soviet Parley Stalls Cuban Prisoner Release

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The deal to ransom the Cuban invasion prisoners from Fidel Castro has been put in cold storage until the Soviet missiles crisis has come to a complete end.

This is the message United States officials have given here during the past two days to James B. Donovan, New York attorney and special negotiator for the prisoners' relatives.

Mr. Donovan today completed a busy round of conversations at the State and Justice Departments.

"Negotiations with Fidel Castro have been completed

and agreement has been reached," he said in an interview last night. "But we must still find out whether the United States Government feels the prisoners exchange is consistent with the national interest at this time."

United States officials indicate it is not—at least for the moment. Their main concern is to avoid any complications in the remaining negotiations with the Soviet Union at the United Nations over promised international inspection and verification of the removal of offensive weapons from Cuba.

Up to this point, Cuban Premier Castro has been the main

obstruction to agreement. Policy-makers here fear that any deal on the prisoners at this point would be used by the Cuban dictator as a "good will" gesture aimed at weakening the American demands in the negotiations.

"I am still optimistic the release will take place," Mr. Donovan said last night. "We have a limited objective, a specific mission to spare human lives, and I do not think that it is inconsistent with national policy."

He reaffirmed that no money is to go to the Castro regime for the 1,113 prisoners still held from the abortive Bay of Pigs invasion of April, 1961. Instead Mr. Castro has made out lists of drugs, other medicine and baby foods he desires for the civilian population.

\$17 Million Cost Seen

Their market value is believed to be about the \$62 million Mr. Castro long ago demanded for the prisoners in one form or another. At discount prices, the Cuban Families Committee, the private exile group that has hired Mr. Donovan, will have to pay about \$17 million for the food and medicine.

Informed sources here do not think Mr. Donovan and the committee have been as successful as they claim in meeting all Mr. Castro's demands. It is conceded that Mr. Donovan has made "great progress" with heads of pharmaceutical firms in getting drug and food donations, but it is doubted that he has received everything on the ransom lists.

Under these circumstances, the attitude of United States officials has been to encourage Mr. Donovan to continue the effort against the day when the international situation is better clarified.

"When the day comes that he needs a definite decision one way or another," said one official, "we shall have to study the whole situation very carefully."

Castro Motives Studied

From the policy point of view, the difficulty is that the Kennedy Administration knows full well that Mr. Castro is not acting from purely humanitarian motives. During the early phases of Mr. Donovan's negotiations in Havana last October, before the Soviet missiles were discovered in Cuba, the Cuban dictator was trying to commit the United States to a no-invasion pledge through the prisoners' exchange.

This maneuver fell flat because the Kennedy Administration has steadfastly disassociated itself from Mr. Donovan's "private" negotiations. In policy-making circles here, the ransom is regarded as a "debt of conscience" which President Kennedy feels he owes to Cuban exiles he could not or would not save militarily during the fateful invasion.

But in the light of Mr. Kennedy's offer to give a formal no-invasion pledge on Cuba in return for international guarantees against Soviet offensive weapons in Cuba, this debt of conscience must be paid more carefully than ever, in the official view here.

If the prisoners were ransomed at this juncture, officials argue Mr. Castro could use the exchange as proof that the United States wants to reach some "understanding" with his regime with or without fulfillment of the Soviet prom-

ise of international guarantees against nuclear offensive weapons in Cuba.

These officials emphasize that they have no intention of giving Mr. Castro such a propaganda opportunity. They repeatedly assert that "peaceful coexistence" with the Castro regime is out of the question whether or not the prisoners are released, and that in any case negotiations with the Soviet Union take precedence over all else at the moment.